



# PLANNING FOR SUPPORT OPERATIONS IN A MOUNTAINOUS ENVIRONMENT

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In any operation, it is the leader's responsibility to set the conditions for his subordinate unit's success. This principle is no different in the mountains of Afghanistan or on the city streets of Iraq.

During mountain operations, there can be a greater importance on combat support and combat service support planning and setting of conditions than during urban operations due to the severely restricted terrain, the rapidly changing and unpredictable nature of the weather, and the limited and unreliable sources of air support in a mountainous environment. The responsibility for this planning and setting of conditions falls as much on the infantry company commander as it does with combat support or combat service support elements typically associated with those activities because of the decentralized nature of the counterinsurgency fight and the increased responsibility at the lowest levels of maneuver command.

It goes without saying that a mountainous environment is primarily composed of severely restricted terrain. The extreme relief in terrain, the limited number of trails and roads, the limited trafficability of trails and roads, and the natural obstacles (such as bodies of water) that are rarely

spanned due to the remote nature of mountainous areas, all greatly impact a unit's ability to resupply itself. Even when counters to any of these factors exist, they oftentimes are so few in number that security can be degraded by the predictability of the action.

My company's experience during Operation Mountain Lion in the spring of 2006 provides a typical example of the logistical challenges faced at the company level in Afghanistan. My rifle company's operation included a three-hour drive from our base of operations in Asadabad, along a single road through the Pech River valley (a road barely capable of accommodating a U.S. vehicle at several points), crossing a river with the choice of two different foot bridges (either bridge barely capable of accommodating a U.S. Soldier with his personal equipment), and a further 13-hour dismounted movement along another single road into a connecting valley (incapable of accommodating anything but individual dismounted movement once we began the final portion of the ascent to our objective, climbing approximately 5,000 feet in two days). The effect this had on our logistical capabilities was immense. Our mounted portion was completely supported by U.S.

capabilities, our dismounted portion was supported partially with local national (LN) vehicles and manual support (LNs carrying our rucksacks with nonsensitive equipment and personal gear), with the majority of effort coming from the heavy perspiration of 150 U.S. and 50 Afghan Soldiers.

We were able to hire local national support with the use of our field ordering officer funds, and they soon became a consistent fixture of our logistical trains, with all five local national vehicles, in the valley in which we were operating, working directly for our company team (or more specifically for my first sergeant). We also augmented our diet with local national bread, due to the increased caloric intake required in a mountainous environment, and the decreased amount of Class I in our Soldier load, predetermined in an effort to cut weight anywhere possible without sacrificing ammunition, batteries, cold weather gear, or water. Our interpreters would normally conduct the transactions with local nationals, ensuring the locals were offering us a fair price. After a couple days in our position, we did receive air resupply, and whenever the weather allowed, the logistical support from our

forward support company was incredible, moving enough Class I to our position to resemble a Walmart stockyard. As our company (and battalion and brigade for that matter) learned over the course of 16 months, the weather could not always be counted on to cooperate with anticipated logistical support, and requirements for ammunition, water, food, and replacement ACUs (single stitch uniforms were not very durable, especially in the seat of the trousers) did not cease.

Anyone that has been stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado, will recognize that local weather (for Colorado) is normally reported by as many as nine geographical regions. Some regions contain portions of other regions, such as the Urban Corridor (the area that straddles Interstate 25 from the Wyoming/Colorado state line south to Pueblo), and the Palmer Divide (a ridge of land that extends from the Front Range of the Rockies in central Colorado, eastward toward the city of Limon on the eastern plains), but they are reported in these nine different regions because they cover areas of typical travel and residence (such as the Urban Corridor), or they cover areas of common weather patterns and systems (such as the Palmer Divide). The regions reported in the Colorado area are so numerous because the weather can be so different in such a short span of time and space. The areas covered by the nine regions range from approximately 3,000 to 14,000 feet in elevation, have multiple mountain ranges and valleys, and subsequently multiple accurate weather sensor systems throughout the area to understand current conditions, and forecast developing weather.

The significance of this example is that conditions in Afghanistan are very similar in regards to terrain and weather, but not the ability to accurately report and analyze the weather in time for operational planning that takes place days in advance of execution. Elevation in our company, let alone our battalion or brigade area of operations, could range anywhere from approximately 1,000 feet to over 9,000 feet above sea level, and upwards of 14,000 feet at the extreme end of the spectrum. Aircraft could originate at bases with almost an 8,000 foot difference in elevation between where they took off and their destinations for resupply. The weather between those two locations can vary drastically based on the elevation alone, but intervening ridgelines add an additional factor that can change weather conditions from one valley to the next. This affected both rotary wing and fixed wing logistical support, as well as close combat aviation, and close air support (although for obvious reasons fixed wing aircraft were able to fly in slightly less desirable weather conditions than rotary wing).

Because of this advantage by fixed wing aircraft, and in an effort to make up for a lack of rotary wing support (due to weather effects and availability), airdrop resupply by containerized delivery system (CDS) was utilized, and will no doubt continue to be utilized by most units during operations in Afghanistan. With the extreme relief in terrain, few open flat areas, and local national residences in close proximity to U.S. bases, CDS drops also provided a possibility of significant collateral damage to civilians and their property, as well as a significant possibility of a missed drop (in terms of missing the

planned drop location), and consequently a missed resupply. Because of these inconsistencies and dangers, CDS drops were not an adequate replacement for rotary wing or ground resupply.

Because of these rapidly changing weather conditions, the limited amount of aircraft and available mission hours, and the relative lack of accurate weather sensors in locations necessary to analyze conditions (usually a battle captain telling you what the sky looks like), special consideration needs to be taken in mountainous environments during operational planning. Logistical support, close combat aviation, close air support, and casualty evacuations (CASEVAC) involving either rotary wing or fixed wing aircraft in the mountains, or more specifically Afghanistan, have to be planned almost assuming the supporting missions will be cancelled.

The key to alleviating the stress these conditions place on combat support or combat service support in a mountainous environment is realistic assessment, and advanced planning at the company level. The greatest resolution for resource requirements is where the rubber meets the road, and the responsibility for anticipating things such as detainee movement support, supply class requirements and status, CASEVAC possibilities, and impacts from the weather over the long term, all fall squarely on the shoulders of the company commander. Without an accurate and knowledgeable assessment in areas such as these, battalions, brigades, and divisions can not correctly allocate combat support and combat service support elements to ensure the right assets are where they need to be when it matters the most. With the flexibility of the U.S. Soldier and the strength of the combined arms commander, the difficulties of the mountains can be overcome.

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SPC Micah E. Clare

*Soldiers with the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment watch as supplies are dropped by aircraft in the Paktika province of Afghanistan November 10, 2007.*